

Embattled London Mayor Randall Weddle returns to office after court supports his appeal

MCKENNA HORSLEY
KENTUCKY LANTERN

Ousted London Mayor Randall Weddle has been reinstated to his post following a brief court battle.

He wasted no time returning to office and led a special-called city council meeting shortly after the ruling.

Circuit Judge David Williams ruled in favor of Weddle returning to the office in a Monday decision. The order said “the London City Council failed to present sufficient grounds” for removing Weddle from office.

Weddle had appealed an early September decision of the city council to remove him from office. After an hours-long hearing, the council members voted to remove Weddle based on three charges of misconduct and willful neglect, including that the mayor signed a \$5 million mortgage for the city without council approval.

According to court documents, Weddle’s attorney, Carmine Iaccarino, argued that city council members had engaged “in politics and score-settling” when removing Weddle from office “without legally sufficient basis or substantial evidence to support that drastic action.” Iaccarino had previously represented Weddle during the September city council meeting.

Chris Wiest, who presented the city council’s arguments, wrote in a brief that Weddle’s appeal should be denied and defended the process. Wiest said Weddle “was given



Kentucky Lantern photo by McKenna Horsley
Supporters gather around Randall Weddle after the city council removed him as London mayor on Sept. 5.

notice of the charges against him, several of which were the basis of the removals of other public officers that were upheld by the Kentucky appellate courts, he was given a full public hearing, evidence was adduced under oath, he was permitted to introduce evidence in his behalf, he was permitted to cross-examine witnesses, and where all necessary votes for unanimity” and state law was followed.

At the end of the September council meeting, Tracie Handley was appointed acting mayor.

Williams, a judge for the 40th Judicial Circuit, was assigned as a special judge in

the case filed in Laurel County following a motion from Weddle’s attorneys. Williams is the former Republican state Senate president.

Weddle and the city council have had a months-long brawl leading up to the courtroom drama. City Council meetings became public spectacles as the former mayor and the council members argued back and forth about the allegations. Plus, citizens packed meeting rooms to show their support for or opposition to the mayor.

Special city council meetings were set for Monday evening and Tuesday afternoon to discuss local tax

rates, with a vote scheduled for Tuesday.

Weddle led the Monday meeting, seated next to council members. A livestream on the city’s Facebook page had more than 1,000 viewers at the start of the meeting.

Weddle told city council members he held “no grudges in what you’ve done.

“Now that you’ve done what you’ve done, and the courts have overturned your ruling, I’m just asking now that you guys start working with me, and I with you, and let’s move the city of London forward,” Weddle said.

Tighter regulation of pop-up vaccine clinics for KY pets opposed by some animal advocates

LIAM NIEMEYER
KENTUCKY LANTERN

LEXINGTON — Some veterinarians who oversee pop-up vaccine clinics in retail stores fear a proposed state regulation could reduce access to preventive veterinary care in rural Kentucky by making such clinics impossible to offer.

The Kentucky Board of Veterinary Medical Examiners during a public hearing Monday heard concerns about a proposal that would change regulatory requirements for Kentucky veterinary facilities.

Those concerned about the regulation — which included representatives from humane societies and licensed veterinarians with the company VIP Petcare — argued the amendment would mean less access to pet vaccines for rabies, canine parvovirus and other diseases.

VIP Petcare, a mobile veterinary services company, operates clinics within retail stores such as Tractor Supply Co. and Feeders Pet Supply. Franklin County Humane Society executive director Kerry Lowary said she feared the proposed regulation could also make it “financially untenable” for nonprofits to conduct animal vaccine clinics.

“I implore the board to reconsider advancing these regulations until it receives input from the organizations offering affordable, low cost spay and neuter services and conducting community-wide vaccination clinics,” Lowary said to the board, meeting at its offices at the Kentucky Horse Park.

WHAT WOULD THE REGULATION DO?

The board, made up of licensed veterinarians for large and small animals, oversees the licensing and certificating of the more than 2,600 active veterans throughout Kentucky. The board in July advanced the proposed regulation requiring the “dedicated” space that vet-

erinarians use to treat animals be a “clearly distinct, purpose-built area that is physically and operationally separate from non-veterinary spaces and retail shopping areas.”

Such a space would be required to be confined and enclosed with floor-to-ceiling walls so that “patients are fully contained and separated from persons who are not veterinary personnel or an owner.”

The regulation appears to not affect traditional veterinary offices and mobile veterinary units housed in large vehicles that already meet the space requirements. Government-sponsored vaccine clinics, including mass rabies vaccine clinics sponsored by local public health departments, would be exempt from the regulation.

According to minutes from a July special meeting, the board argued the regulation was needed because of “real issues with public safety,” such as the possibilities that improperly disposed needles could cause an “inadvertent” puncture and that aggressive animals could “lash out” at passersby. The board also argued that temporary veterinary spaces could be a danger to animals that have an adverse reaction to treatments and need follow-up care.

Licensed veterinarians and other representatives with VIP Petcare told the board that their in-store operations are safe, saying that during tens of thousands of “patient encounters” there have been no examples of animals escaping or syringes being mishandled.

A LACK OF ACCESS VS. ‘LIMITED’ RISKS

Thomas Kerr, the director of veterinary compliance with VIP Petcare, told the board the in-store clinics offered by the company vaccinated more than 4,200 dogs and cats against rabies, conducted 1,700 tests for heartworm and tick-borne disease and microchipped almost 400 pets.

Kentucky has kicked people off food benefits using data that doesn’t tell the full story

SYLVIA GOODMAN
KENTUCKY PUBLIC RADIO

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (AP) — A single mother who relied on federal food assistance lost her benefits in 2020 after Kentucky investigators concluded she’d committed fraud.

The state alleged she had made multiple same-day purchases, tried to overdraw her account a few times, entered a few invalid PINs and sometimes made “whole-dollar” purchases that are unlikely during typical grocery runs.

The woman from Salyersville in Appalachian Kentucky had an explanation: She worked at the store. She would sometimes buy lunch there and then get groceries after work. Her child would also occasionally use her card.

An administrative hearing officer kicked her off the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) regardless, based solely on the allegedly suspicious shopping pattern. She sued — and won.

“It is draconian to take away SNAP benefits from a single mother without clear and convincing evidence that intentional trafficking was occurring during a time when food scarcity is so prevalent,” Franklin County Judge Thomas Wingate said in his 2023 decision.

A SURGE OF DISQUALIFICATIONS

Over the last five years, the Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services has brought hundreds of fraud cases that are heavily reliant on transactional data with the goal of revoking people’s food benefits.

Judges, lawyers and legal experts said in interviews and in court documents that such evidence proves little. Kentucky Public Radio reviewed dozens of administrative hearing decisions and court documents from the last five years in which the cabinet relied on shopping patterns to prove a person had “trafficked,” or sold, their benefits.

Kentucky is so aggressive in disqualifying people from SNAP benefits that the state is second in the nation for per-capita administrative disqualifications, behind Florida, according to the most recent federal data from 2023.

In the last decade, disqualifications in Kentucky rose from fewer than 100 in 2015 to over 1,800 in 2023. And more than 300 others have been accused of selling or misusing their benefits since January 2024, according to records obtained by Kentucky Public Radio.

Another Franklin County

judge in 2023 ordered the cabinet to stop disqualifying individuals based solely on transactional data, but since the decision, at least three lawsuits allege the health agency continues to bring such cases.

Transactional data alone cannot prove intent to commit fraud nor show the actual result of any individual transaction, University of Kentucky law professor Cory Dodds said, adding, “I’m not saying that folks didn’t do it, didn’t commit the fraud, but I don’t think the cabinet in a lot of these cases has met their burden of proof, either.”

FACING PUNISHMENT, RECIPIENTS ARE PRESSURED TO WAIVE THEIR HEARINGS

Kentuckians receive notice of their alleged suspicious activity through mailed letters, in which they’re asked to voluntarily waive their right to a hearing and automatically accept the punishment. On first offense, that’s generally a one-year SNAP ban. They’re also required to repay the full amount the state says they misused.

Often, these cases involve a relatively small amount of money. Records show that more than 900 people have been kicked off for “trafficking” or misuse for less than \$1,000 since 2022. The lowest amount alleged was 14 cents.

The state has leaned heavily on administrative hearing waivers since 2015, and by 2023, almost a quarter of all disqualifications were via waiver. Some lawsuits allege individuals did not fully understand the consequences of the waivers and were encouraged to sign by

officials.

Kentucky Public Radio reviewed more than two dozen cases since 2020 in which the cabinet accused an individual of trafficking using only spending patterns, despite the participants’ denial or lack of response — and with no other evidence or interviews presented, according to administrative hearing decisions.

Kendra Steele, a spokesperson for the Cabinet for Health and Family Services, declined to schedule an interview with cabinet officials after multiple requests. Steele said in an email that “we have never” brought trafficking cases based solely on transactional data and acknowledged it would not be sufficient to prove intent.

In response to a different question, Steele wrote the investigation into fraud allegations consists of looking into income, living situations “and patterns of spending that are indicative of trafficking.” She did not indicate how any of those factors could be used to prove intentional misuse or selling of SNAP benefits, or how it differs from relying on transactional data — which is inherently a pattern of spending. Steele said in another email that they also interview vendors and SNAP recipients.

‘IT’S OUR FELLOW KENTUCKIANS WHO ARE GOING HUNGRY’

Roughly 4 in 25 Kentuckians suffer from food insecurity, similar to the national rate of about 14%, according to an Associated Press analysis of U.S. Census Bureau and Feeding America data.

The USDA will stop collect-

ing and releasing statistics on food insecurity after October, saying Sept. 20 that the numbers had become “overly politicized.” The decision comes in the wake of federal funding cuts for food and nutrition safety net programs nationwide.

In the last fiscal year, 1 in 8 Kentuckians benefitted from SNAP, formerly called food stamps. Food insecurity in Kentucky’s rural areas is even more stark, and legal representation harder to come by.

“The people who benefit from these programs are some of the folks that we need to be helping the most in this country,” Dodds said. “It’s our fellow Kentuckians who are going hungry as a result of baseless allegations of waste, fraud and abuse.”

The cabinet denied KPR’s request for case notes on individual fraud accusations starting in early 2024 that would include the evidence used in the accusations. But administrative hearing decisions reviewed by KPR from 2020 through 2023 included evidence the cabinet relied on; hearing officers would frequently say a person had trafficked their benefits based on shopping patterns the state deemed suspicious.

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